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# One step up: integrative learning strategies for low skilled adults

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## Abstract

One of the biggest problems in the European society is the high amount of low skilled people. Many efforts are done to solve this with social and educational measures.

Recently an inventory of outreach strategies to enable adults to go one step up in their qualifications has been done all around Europe. Its findings are accepted by the European Commission, and the recommendations derived, based on the empiric data findings, are basis for shaping the new politic decisions in Member States, as priority of 'Europe2020'. The article gives an overview on the main strategies and refers to examples of good practice.

*Keywords:* low qualified adults, adult basic education, integrative strategic approach, "one step up".

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## 1. The challenges

The low skilled adults in Europe represent 15-20 % of the whole population. It depends from how "low skilled" is defined – normally the indicators are the capabilities to read, write and count (literacy and numeracy), but also formal qualifications. The Isced-2 definition includes these indicators. This group is represented differently in the European countries, in some of them representing more than half of the labour force.

In 2008 the activity rate of the total population was 77 % against about 63 % for the Isced-2 group. That means: that there is a difference of – generally speaking – 14 % employment rate between the better and the less well educated people. This differs strongly amongst European regions (and according to demographic aspects, the less educated women are f.e. more often unemployed than the less educated men and the older less educated people are not as often employed as the younger ones. No wonder that the lower educated people show also a higher rate of unemployment. In the Isced-2 Segment was (2008) the unemployment rate at 9.8 %, while the average rate was 6 %.

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### 1.1. Participation in education

The challenges for the European societies are threefold: with a high level of low skilled people there is a weakness of the economical development, and not making use of all possible resources of the labour force. There is the risk of social exclusion of a big minority too, which might easily lead to severe problems of a social divide. Also there is the danger of bad development of the society and the function of citizenship.

Furthermore, there are moral and ethical problems regarding the character of people in the sight of humanity, regarding the individual human rights and also concerning the social life of each single Citizen. The competitiveness of each single Member State and of the Europe as a whole is based on the “value” of its human capital, directly related to the educational background of each individual. Thus, indicators as school dropout, participation in higher and tertiary (continuing) education should be seen together. The figures for the low skilled people are weak at all educational level, and the well known “Mathew effect” is confirmed regarding them. The rate of participation into formal education of low educated is 2.5%, compared with a rate of 6.3% for the total population\*. Their exclusion from the labour market will increase, once the prognosis shows that most of the jobs will be in tertiary sector.

## 2. The obstacles

It would be easy if the participation in education were only be related to the field of education as such. But a lot of analyses and researches are making evident that there is a complex bundle of factors inducing the existence of low skills.

An important factor is the situation in and the support of the family. Children belonging to families which don't have a relation to education and not valuing education and qualifications are likely not to acquire any competencies. There is a high coincidence of these families and the chance to get an acceptable education. The analysis showed that well educated families are favored to receive a higher educational level. And if, like the situation in Germany, the educational system (mainly the school system) is not prepared to support students from low skilled families, this deficit leads to an intergenerational bias.

But not only the educational system plays a role here. Besides this very important is the factor of costs. The more expensive the participation in education is for the students, the more this turns out to be a barrier mainly for the socially weaker families and students. It is therefore important to look at the financial burden which is given to learner in different regions and countries.

A big and more important role plays the attitude of the employers towards the learning activities of their students. It is obvious that a higher qualified employee in a big company has three or four times more chances to take part in continuing and further education. And this is true for low skilled employees too, whilst here the concrete support of the employer means an even stronger impulse for further education.

Beside all these elements of the environment of the learners it is the most important question how he/she is motivated and what kind of prerequisites and experiences for further learning are given. In most cases there is a coincidence of bad environment factors and bad experiences in learning processes (failures, disappointments, demotivating experiences), which are personal and individual barriers for starting a further learning process. This leads of course also to low prerequisites for learning, very often a factor for early drop outs.

Strategies for low skilled people to go one step up have to take in consideration these complex obstacles and their interdependence.

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\* Eurostat, *Adult Education Survey 2007*, [Http://epp.eurostat.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/microdata/adult\\_education\\_survey](http://epp.eurostat.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/microdata/adult_education_survey)

### 3. The key factors

Amongst the factors which changed the attitude of low skilled towards learning and education there can be defined mainly four: the integration of learning into the everyday life, the support, the didactical design and the political framework, combined with the evaluation and monitoring of all interventions.

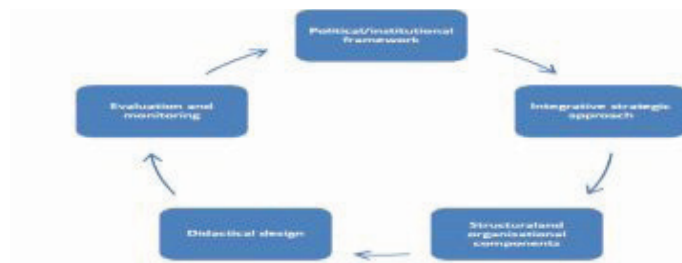


Figure 1. Key factors

The *integration of learning into the everyday life*: this means actually an integration of education and learning in the concrete environment of the daily life of the low skilled people. The families, the peer groups, the clubs and associations, the neighborhood and - above all – the workplace belong to this category. The last one is the main factor for those, who are in work, so almost nine out of ten. Since small and middle enterprises are not extremely engaged in the matter of continuing education of their employees, there is a big gap of needs and opportunities in the field of work. But the places of communication and social life are also of extremely high relevance, mainly in social structures which are interdependent within, f. e. in migrant families and associations.

The *support* to take part in continuing education needed is of various kinds. Beside information about possible learning opportunities, there is a lack of counseling in a learner oriented neutral way. Support is also needed in the wide ranged difficulties of carrying onwards the daily life with children and with, possibly, a lack of income and for the use of the gained qualification, to step into the labour market and appropriate working places.

The *didactical design* leads to the question, how to organize a teaching-learning-process with low skilled groups. Aspects of motivation, of prerequisites, of learning experience and of valuing of learning outcomes are of high importance. In many cases there is needed an innovative didactical structure, which is strongly related to the special conditions of these groups. Developing innovative schemes in the didactical fields is rather costly and requires high competences of teachers, trainers and instructors. In most cases there is a bigger desire for moderators than for experts in instruction.

Finally the *political activities* are necessary as the frame for all. Without a political support of the learning of the people, it is impossible to raise the qualification of the whole population, mainly that one with low skills. Their problems are not solved within the educational sector alone; there has to be a coherent system of valuing and acknowledging the efforts of learning. A political framework, which puts the individual learning in a holistic system of developing the level of competences in the population, is therefore to be adopted.

### 4. The strategies

In the exploration of the situation in the European member states there can be seen a lot of projects, tackling the problems, challenges and referring to the identified key factors. Many of the projects are innovative, not always with a large scale, but all of them with an appropriate analysis of the outcome and the impact. They normally fit in an overall strategy to solve the problem of the low skilled groups in the respective countries and regions – strategies in this regard have to take in account the complex factors of environment, culture, history, moral and ethical codes.

That makes it difficult to transfer models like this as a whole, it is more the approach and the single elements of the models and projects which count.

Many of the projects face the factor of embedding learning into the everyday life. They try to address as such the multidimensional and complex problems the adults with low skills are facing, and to come with relevant solutions for them. The advantage here is the access to the people and the evidence of the use of learning for them in their reality. Examples for this approach of embedded learning are: *Literacy integrated into the job* (Belgium) – mainly for migrant people, with literacy problems and low qualified; similar experience is *German into the workplace* (national program in Germany, but also the experience promoted at Passage gGmbH in Hamburg); *Reintegration of women in the healthcare sector* (Netherlands) – women from rural area, with migrant background, struggling to get back into the labour market after educating children; New solutions for promoting ex offender employment (Latvia); for specific environment (e.g. prison, army); similar experience for the imprisoned woman in Slovakia (trying to overcome not only the social and communication barriers, but also to provide them with transversal competencies and a qualification); or “*Basic skills in the British army*).

Other strategically oriented projects follow an “alternance approach”, a follow up of different learning sites in an informal setting. The advantage is the opportunity to reach the people at different places; these approaches need to build on networks and reliable collaborations.

An important part of the best practice projects is dealing with the task of supporting the learning activities. Support is here not only in terms of motivating and counseling, but also very concretely in terms of money and resources. Two examples might clarify this: *Centre for new opportunities* in Portugal, which gives them the possibility of counseling, validation of their experiences, and the further guidance for attending formal/ non-formal path, to get the missing units of competencies; and *Individual credit card for training*, Italy, as example of financial support; also the *Integrated support for labour market integration*, also from Italy, is to be considered.

For a big group of low skilled people it is necessary to combine different aspects to make them aware of and active in learning objectives; this group of good practice examples tries to figure out the important factors in several dimensions of daily life, so it is more a less and amplified variation of the embedded learning. It can be called the “tailored multidimensional design”, which has to be designed for each group, in each situation and for each topic separately. The multidimensional design can be of different kinds, depending on the types of intervention: developing institutional capacity, developing curriculum, teaching materials, information campaigns etc. – if it is a large scale national initiative – e.g. *Second chance programme (Romania)*; or a tailored combination of measures for adults with multiple barriers – e.g. *JUMP Project (Austria)*; or trying to combine different services to these adults – e.g. *Learndirect (UK)*, or *Guidance and counseling at non-residential fork-high schools, Denmark*, or *xPress on track (Sweden)*. Finally there are a lot of innovative projects and examples of good practice preparing learning opportunities for the individuals, taking for serious the individuality of each learning activity and each biographical background. In this approach the flexibility of the provision and its fitting to the situation of the learner is of highest interest. This approach causes a lot of problems for the providers, but is evidently very efficient for the learner. An example might be the *1001 Empowered Project (NL)*, the entire problem - the life and the world of the low skilled - being taken into consideration. Also, the *Noste Program (Fi)* is to be mentioned as example of networked institutions with different kind of expertise, cooperating for the benefit of the respective adults.

All strategies are facing the identified key factors of the achieved level of qualification of the low skilled. But they are reflecting differently the context factors and the pragmatically definable aim of the activity. A reach database with 64 examples of best practices coming from countries from all around Europe can be found in the Inventory.

## 5. Comprehensive policy

Regarding the needed policy there are some crucial regulations and conceptual prerequisites which are basic and which are in many countries and regional bodies not yet self understanding.

First of all, the commitment of the policy makers has to be pointed out. Without the concrete wish and program to take care of the problem of the low skilled nothing can be done further. There is no policy making towards “One step up” without this commitment. It can be reached by political action, convincement, and articulated program.

The second basic need is the concept of sharing. Nothing can be done without a policy of sharing problems and solutions, views and interests. Most of the successful projects for “one step up” are based on systems of public/private partnerships. The sharing of costs and responsibilities are crucial.

The third one is the need of a holistic approach. Education alone can never be the approach to solve complex social and political problems. Like in all ecologically definable systems all relevant factors have not only to be identified but also to be put in a holistic concept, which has to be put in practice. The question: who has to do what in which moment, is one of the most important questions in building a political reality. The time schedule, the division of roles, the monitoring and evaluation of a process of implementation is the starting point of political activities dealing with such a complex problem.

Finally there is the participation of the people being involved. This is not only a moral aspect but also one for the efficiency and efficacy of the action. The target group has to be involved in planning of the programs, in monitoring and in trouble shooting, listening to the learner’s voice being a prerequisite for the feasibility of the solutions. They have to be made the subjects of their own process of “One step up”.

Also in the Peer learning activities run in Dublin, London or Oslo, a lot of recommendations to policy makers were pointed out. In the same line, there are also the recommendations from CONFINTEA VI (the UNESCO conference in Belem, Dec. 2009), which insist on clear goals and deadlines, financing and technical support to create large-scale and sustainable literacy programs. This means combined measures, from ensuring skilled staff to teaching basic skills, until involving all stakeholders in planning and co-financing adult basic skills provision, or developing and implementing a national action plan for literacy and/or basic skills, accompanied by national measurement systems.

The *Basic skills provision for adults: Policy and practice guideline* just launched by the European Commission this autumn, as a synthesis valorizing all the findings both of the Peer learning activities and of the *Inventory of outreach strategies to enable people to go one step up*, is a helpful tool, both for policy makers and for the providers, for strategic and operational planning, and for providing flexible and tailored, qualitative learning support.

To sum up, some steps are to be done:

- Designing an integrative strategy, with a flexible framework for cooperation between institutional and non-institutional, public and private actors, with regulated participation of stakeholders and providers in defining the problem and shaping the intended programs and combined measures, to make the system comprehensive and well articulated.
- Removing the barriers to access for all adults with low levels of education/ qualification requires articulated actions at different levels: from the certification (and accreditation) of different forms of provision, to designing open and flexible access, transfer and progression to different/ alternative education or employment pathways, and to ensure that people find it easier to gain recognition and credit for any learning they have undertaken. More support should be available for the persons involved in delivering education and training for those in the NEET (not in employment, education or training) group.
- More choices mean more chances, thus:
  - bringing learning closer to learners in their communities and workplaces;
  - introducing greater flexibility into the education system, as well as a greater synergy between different forms of provision and bridges between the different learning pathways, creating more opportunities for learners to move between different parts of the system, and widening the range of learning opportunities available;
  - offering a wider range of choices which leads to national certification or accreditation;
  - combining literacy provision with other courses, including vocational training.
- Define responsibilities clearly:

- the drivers and decision-making centres of a strategy need to be clearly identified (e.g. civil society, economic and social entities, etc.), with a clear specification of the necessary levels of action.
- local responsibility needs to be enforced, to ensure proximity of intervention to the real life situation;
- employers should be motivated to strengthen a culture of learning in and outside work, to be part of the infrastructure and network for supporting learning.

These are some of the main recommendations to follow in order to set comprehensive and well articulated system of support for the low skilled adults.

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